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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001638

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [ECON](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: KEY GROUPS EXPRESS CONCERNS ABOUT CONSTITUTIONAL  
CHANGE PLANS

REF: MANILA 1538 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The powerful Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and the influential Makati Business Club (MBC) have issued statements asserting that the GRP and its allies are moving forward too quickly with plans for Constitutional change. Neither statement specifically condemned the notion of shifting to a parliamentary system, however. The GRP took note of the statements, but gave no indication that it planned to slow down the process. A poll by the respected Social Weather Station (SWS) reported that a majority of the public does not support Constitutional change at this point. The seeming haste of the people's initiative in particular may well end up as its undoing. End Summary.

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Bishops' Statement  
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¶2. (U) The CBCP issued a "Pastoral Statement" on April 7 expressing concern about the pace of Constitutional change efforts, which now focus on a signature drive for a "People's Initiative" calling for a plebiscite to shift the current bicameral system with an executive president to a unicameral parliamentary system with an executive prime minister by ¶2010. The statement's key points follow:

-- "changing the Constitution involves major shifts in the form of government and requires widespread participation, total transparency, and relative serenity that allows for rational discussion and debate." These conditions were not present at this time, the CBCP claimed, adding with "alarm" that "signatures are apparently collected without adequate information, discussion, and education." The CBCP stated that "the changes being proposed for signatures are also dangerously unclear;"

-- "the reasons for Constitutional change must be based on the common good rather than on self-serving interests or the interests of political dynasties." The "lack of clarity" regarding the signature campaign and the changes desired raise "disturbing questions about who will truly benefit from these changes" and "those who promote it." The CBCP went on to ask about who was funding the effort; and,

-- The CBCP is not against Constitutional change per se, but wanted Filipinos "to reflect and pray over" its points.

¶3. (C) According to Monsignor Hernando Coronel, an assistant to Gaudencio Cardinal Rosales, the CBCP statement was "simply

a reaction to what bishops felt was a mad rush toward making changes without thinking things through." The CBCP, he underscored, had no position on whether or not the country should change to a parliamentary system, but -- whatever happened -- "the public needs to be fully consulted, which is not happening now." He added that many bishops, including Cardinal Rosales, were skeptical of the efficacy of "change for the sake of change," believing that the country's "rotten culture of politics" was the main problem, not the system in place now.

14. (U) On April 11, Sinag, a group of Catholic educators and missionaries, separately issued a statement condemning the Constitutional change effort, accusing President Arroyo of using the effort for her own political ends. Sinag is affiliated with the Association of Major Religious Superiors, a large Catholic organization mainly focused on education, which demanded Arroyo's resignation last year.

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Key Business Group Chimes In  
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15. (SBU) On April 10, the MBC also issued a statement, cautioning "against the haste and haphazard manner in which the government is pushing for Constitutional amendments." It asserted that there was a lack of "enlightened public discussion and debate on the merits." The current "People's Initiative" was flawed without enabling legislation, contrary to a 1997 Supreme Court ruling. The MBC called for "more careful study and public discussion to determine what is in the best interest of the nation economically, socially, and politically." It went on to warn that "rushed decisions will have negative repercussions for the country and its economy."

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Poll Shows Change Proposal in Trouble  
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16. (U) In a poll released on April 10, SWS reported that 56 percent of Filipinos did not support Constitutional change. Only 42 percent of the public favored such change. SWS asserted that its findings, based on a survey of 1,200 people nationally, was "statistically significant" and "contrary to the administration's claim that Constitutional change was unstoppable." The poll also showed that public awareness of the proposal to amend the Constitution was very low, with only 13 percent saying they know what the proposal involves, 40 percent saying they know a little, and 46 percent saying they do not know anything. While not as detailed or recent as the SWS poll, a separate Pulse Asia poll also showed that only a minority of respondents favor Constitutional change at this time.

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GRP Reaction  
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17. (U) Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye publicly expressed Malacanang's appreciation for the CBCP statement and said the administration was "one with the Church in heeding the voice of the people and serving their paramount interest. That is why we will only carry out reforms that are sanctioned by the Constitution, the Supreme Court and the Commission on Elections." House Majority Leader Prospero Nograles separately voiced respect for the Church's statement, but added that he thought that the CBCP really should "keep out of politics."

18. (C) In an April 11 conversation with Dep Pol/C, Gabriel Claudio, President Arroyo's chief political adviser, said that he took both the CBCP and MBC statements "very seriously." He added, however, that in his estimation neither group was anti-charter change, but was simply

requesting that there be "additional deliberations and consultations." Malacanang, he said, was committed to doing this. Queried re the poll results, he replied that it was "very early in the process -- public support will build as the effort continues."

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Comment  
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19. (C) The CBCP and MBC statements do not bode well for the success the current Malacanang-led effort to pursue a people's initiative to change the Constitution. While not mortally dooming the ongoing process, the statements clearly indicate that the GRP does not fully have its ducks in a row. The seeming haste of the effort may well end up as its undoing.

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